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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies on death anxiety report conflicting findings. Concluding that a lack of specificity may explain the mixed results, this study sought to address the lack of focus and to extend and validate the results of an earlier study. A sample of 152 undergraduate students (111 female) from middle to upper-middle class participated. Subjects were informed that the study dealt with general life experiences and that some of the material might be unsettling. Researchers assessed predictor and criterion variables with a number of instruments. Results indicate that the strongest correlate of accidental-death anxiety was self-deception, followed by gender and locus of control. Not surprisingly, males tended to endorse the use of self-deception more often than females, which may reflect society's description of masculine traits: unafraid, strong, in control. Likewise, an internal locus of control -- mirroring subjects' perceived ability to manipulate their environment -- apparently helps individuals cope with the notion of dying accidentally. Females were found to be more external than males, indicating the women's relative lack of perceived control over their environment. The results lend conceptual support to the notion that increasing the specificity of items when assessing a particular construct increases predictive accuracy. (RJM)

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Gender and Locus of Control as Predictors
of Accidental Death Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

Relationships among accidental death anxiety, sex, and locus of control were examined using a sample of 152 undergraduate students. Exploratory analyses were performed to assess the influence of social desirable response bias. Furthermore, the notion of increasing specificity within an outcome measure to increase predictive accuracy was explored. Results indicated that women express higher accidental death anxiety than men. Internals were shown to report lower accidental death anxiety than externals. After statistically controlling for social desirable response bias an unexpected sex effect still existed. Lastly, conceptual support was lent to the notion that by increasing specificity, one increases predictive accuracy.

A. Purpose

Conflicting findings regarding correlates and predictors of death anxiety prompted the current investigation. After assessing the items making up the most commonly used death instrument (Templer's Death Anxiety Scale) it was concluded that the absence of specificity may be contributing to the lack of consistency in findings. The purpose of the current study was twofold. First, to explore this notion of lack of specificity by employing both a general and specific measure of death anxiety and assess the difference in variance explained using sex and locus of control as predictors. Second, to extend and validate the findings of Dodd and Mills (1985) by replicating their study using the Fear of Accidental Death and Injury Scale (FADIS) instrument and including a measure of locus of control and social desirability. By showing an increase in variance explained in the specific versus the general outcome measure, one might conclude that by increasing specificity one increases predictive accuracy.

The following hypotheses were generated:

- 1) There would be a relationship between sex and death anxiety with females reporting higher accidental death anxiety than males.
- 2) There would be a relationship between locus of control and death anxiety with externals reporting higher accidental death anxiety than internals.
- 3) Scores on the FADIS instrument would be positively correlated with scores on the DAS (Templer's general measure of death anxiety).

4) Predictor variables would explain more variance in the FADIS measure than in the DAS due to its specificity.

B. Participants

A sample of 152 undergraduate students, of which 111 were female, from Loyola College in Maryland, participated. Subjects were predominantly Caucasian from middle to upper-middle class, Catholic backgrounds. Approval from the human subjects review board was obtained prior to data collection.

D. Materials

Predictor variables were assessed through the Rotter (1966) I-E Scale for subject's perception of personal control ($M = 12.0$, $SD = 3.9$), and the self-deception ($M = 4.4$, $SD = 3.0$) and impression management ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 3.0$) subscales of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1988) to measure social desirable response bias.

Criterion variables were measured through the use of the Dodd and Mill's (1985) Fear of Accidental Death and Injury Scale ($M = 80.3$, $SD = 17.0$) and Templer's Death Anxiety Scale ($M = 7.8$, $SD = 3.1$). The DAS was used as a measure of general death anxiety while the FADIS instrument was used as the specific measure.

C. Procedure

Subjects were informed that the study dealt with general life experiences and that some of the material might be unsettling. They were handed an envelope containing a demographic sheet, the Rotter I-E Scale, the FADIS, the DAS, and the BIDR. The questionnaires were counterbalanced with the demographic sheet presented first.

E. Results

A t -test revealed a significant sex effect, $t_{(150)}=5.00$, $p < .001$, confirming the first hypothesis. Females ($M=12.41$, $SD=3.76$) reported significantly higher levels of anxiety regarding accidental death than males ($M=10.80$, $SD=4.05$).

Locus of control was also a significant predictor of accidental death anxiety, $r_{(150)} = .36$, $p < .001$. This supports hypothesis two illustrating that internals report lower accidental death anxiety than externals.

Hypothesis three was supported illustrating the validity of the FADIS instrument by showing significant correlation with the DAS, $r_{(150)}=.66$, $p < .001$.

The fourth hypothesis was not supported (using multiple regression analysis) indicating that specificity within the FADIS instrument does not significantly improve predictive accuracy when sex and locus of control are predictors. Although more variance was explained in the specific (FADIS) versus the general (DAS) death measure, this difference did not reach significance.

Lastly, a high inverse relationship was found to exist between sex and self-deception scores and was thought to be confounding the relationship between sex and level of accidental death anxiety. A multiple regression analysis was used to assess the effect of sex after controlling for self-deception on the FADIS instrument. Results indicated a significant sex effect even after controlling for self-deception scores, $F_{(2,149)}=24.88$, $p < .001$. See Table 1 for zero-order correlations among all variables. See Tables 2-5 for the results of the multiple regression analyses.

F. Discussion

The strongest correlate of accidental death anxiety was self-deception, followed by sex and locus of control. Self-deception has been characterized as a true belief in one's positive self reports (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1939; Meehl & Hathaway, 1946) and has been associated with traditional measures of coping and defense (Paulhus, 1988). Not surprisingly, males tended to endorse the use of self-deception more often than females. This may be a reflection of a coping mechanism employed by men in attempting to live up to society's description of what a man should be, i. e., unafraid, strong and in control of the environment. This is further illustrated in the sex differences found within occupations involving the highest risk for accidental death, for example, fire-fighting, law enforcement, and construction.

Similar to the findings of Vargo and Black (1984), the current investigation found internals reporting lower death anxiety than externals. The internal's perceived ability to manipulate his/her environment apparently helps them cope with the notion of dying accidentally which implies the total loss of personal control. Females were found to be more external than males indicating their relative lack of perceived control over their environment. As in life, it appears as though women feel less in control over their death.

Results of the current investigation lend conceptual, though not statistical, support to the notion that increasing specificity of items when assessing a particular construct,

increases predictive accuracy. Although this attempt to control error variance by focusing the subject on a more specific outcome measure tends to restrict generalizability of findings, one is left with a clearer picture of correlates and their relationship to a given construct. Future researchers should bear this in mind when confronted with a body of literature that is inconsistent and conflicting.

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Table 1

Zero-order Correlation Coefficients Among All Variables (N = 152)

	Sex	SDE	IM	LOC	DAS	FADIS
Measure	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Sex		-.17*	.20*	.18*	.36**	.38**
2. SDE			.21*	-.33**	-.38**	.39**
3. IM				-.15*	-.07	-.07
4. LOC					.28**	.36**
5. DAS						.66**
6. FADIS						

Note. SDE - Self-Deception IM - Impression Management

LOC - Locus of Control DAS - Death Anxiety Scale

FADIS - Fear of Accidental Death and Injury

* $p < .05$ one-tailed

** $p < .001$ one-tailed

Table 2

Results of the Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis of the Predictive Potential of Sex and Locus of Control Measures of General Death Anxiety as Measured by the DAS

Step	Variable	Zero-Order r	Beta	Increase in R^2	F
1	Sex	.36	.32	.13	22.31**
2	LOC	.28	.22	.05	15.91**

Note. Betas reported from final summary table. ** $p < .001$

Table 3
Results of the Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis of the
Predictive Potential of Sex and Locus of Control Measures of
Accidental Death Anxiety as Measured by the FADIS

Step	Variable	Zero-Order r	Beta	Increase in R^2	F
1	Sex	.38	.32	.14	24.99**
2	LOC	.36	.30	.09	22.45**

Note. Betas reported from final summary table. ** $p < .001$

Table 4

Results of the Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis Using Sex and Locus of Control Measures as Predictors of General Death Anxiety as Measured by the DAS after Controlling for the Self-Deception Variable

Step	Variable	Zero-Order r	Beta	Increase in R ²	F
	SDE	-.38	-.33	.14	25.38**
1	Sex	.36	.30	.09	22.81**

Note. Locus of control did not enter the regression equation as a significant predictor. Betas are reported from final summary table. **p < .001

Table 5
Results of the Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis Using Sex and Locus of Control Measures as Predictors of Accidental Death Anxiety as Measured by the FADIS after Controlling for the Self-Deception Variable

Step	Variable	Zero-Order r	Beta	Increase in R^2	F
	SDE	-.39	-.27	.15	26.51**
1	Sex	.38	.29	.10	24.88**
2	LOC	.36	.22	.04	22.81**

Note. Betas are reported from final summary table. **p < .001